

Tentative Horror/Disgust

Prolegomena to

Chuck Kleinhans

Ver 1.0

ON METHOD

Normally I write and like to read organized and crafted essays that develop a systematic argument. That's all well and good; it helps readers understand and critique my efforts. But I intend this piece to be different. I want it to be more exploratory, partly because I don't have a completely worked out thesis, and partly because I think that the sympathetic reader (or one who can tolerate it) can also learn from seeing how I work through these ideas.

I do think that cross cultural analysis is important, especially in a time when way too many people invoke "globalization" as a slogan without thinking through the contradictions and complications and thus lose analytic ability to deal with the subject at hand. Here I want to explore some of those issues in a way that hopefully can indicate the range of thinking involved.

I also think that horror as a genre is changing (once again) and the conceptual machinery to understand it is also changing. It is a fluid field at the moment, and I want to do some justice to that and respect it. And related, the newly developing discussion of the senses and emotions in media analysis, in my specific case here, disgust and abjection, needs space to develop.

I don't think I have all the answers, but I think I have some idea of what the questions are that we have to ask to get to another level of analysis. So, what I'll try to do is provide a path or trail, but one which allows for sidetracks, scenic overviews, rest stops, and curious detours, and probably a few dead ends. This is a first installment in a series considering these issues.

ONE: Taste across cultures

"Cultural exchange starts with misunderstanding. We are not afraid of misunderstanding." --Tatsumi Hijikata, founder of Buho art

An apocryphal story: A wealthy Western couple enters an Asian restaurant (somewhere in Asia, or in Chinatown, etc.) with their pet dog. Seated, they ask the waiter to feed the dog a meal in the kitchen while they dine. After dinner they want to retrieve the pet only to find out they have just eaten it.

The joke relies on the known East/West cultural difference that in some Asian cultures eating dog is accepted, while in the West it is prohibited by custom, if

not law. The story can be told with slightly different spins: a communications confusion (mutual, or a translation problem by the waiter); a matter of class and cultural ignorance (and a joke on the couple); the subaltern's revenge; etc.

I've found that discussions which touch on these cultural differences are sometimes awkward between Asians and Westerners, or resolved only with humorous remarks at best and denial at worst. Typically, East Asians know that dog meat is available and consumed in some venues in China, South Korea, and the Philippines; yet they also know that this is considered disgusting by most Western people who tend to think of dogs as companion animals.¹ Recently my home state of Illinois passed legislation, after lobbying by horse lovers, to end the slaughter of horses for meat (for humans and for animal feed) at the one remaining slaughterhouse that handles horses (the meat was usually shipped overseas or turned into dogfood). Yet, in France horsemeat is common, with its own specialty butcher shops. And in the 70s and 80s it was quite common to find horsemeat in some of the Latino groceries in my Northwest side Chicago neighborhood. (Not identified as such, at least to Anglos, but the fat-free flesh, bright red color, and taste was a dead give-away). [chevaline from googleimage]

I've had conversations with Asians and Asian-American immigrants who deny that dogs are eaten in their home country, while allowing it does happen in other countries. Talking about this with a colleague from Karachi, Pakistan, he said it was common lore in his city that whenever a ship from China docked in the port, dogs seemed to disappear. A web search easily turns up examples of tourists blogging about finding dog meat served in Taipei, Beijing, or Seoul, usually after a bit of a search. I've had people from those same places also tell me that indeed it is eaten in their nation of origin, often with a wry acknowledgement that knowing this shocks most Westerners. And I've also had other people from those same places declare it never happens, it is outlawed, it was a custom in the distant past, it might occur in backward rural areas, etc.

On the internet we can witness Western attitudes to Asian treatment of domestic animals: for example, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) shows a clandestine video that claims to document a Chinese dog and cat fur market.²

¹ Although of course this is not uniform. In the US, people in rural areas often see dogs as primarily work animals and value them as such; people in the inner city often view them as primarily watch dogs and automatically considered dangerous and threatening unless proven otherwise. Recent scandals around organized dog fighting and dog racing dramatize the norm that canines should not be treated cruelly. In most of the developing world, only the wealthiest have companion animals, rather than members of the household, and dogs are considered functional with barely any sentiment attached to their injury or death.

²[http://www.petatv.com/tvpopup/video.asp?](http://www.petatv.com/tvpopup/video.asp?video=trent_fur&Player=wm&speed=_med)

[video=trent_fur&Player=wm&speed=_med](http://www.petatv.com/tvpopup/video.asp?video=trent_fur&Player=wm&speed=_med)

In 2006 Chinese authorities were reported as intensively investigating an internet video that purported to show a young woman crushing a kitten to death with her high heel shoes.³ While this kind of thing plays into Western Orientalist beliefs and exoticism of East Asia, it also reveals a more fundamental knowledge that cultures in fact do draw boundaries differently, including in behavior and cuisine.

This is a kind of practical knowledge that one finds within modern mixed societies without reading anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss on the raw and the cooked or Mary Douglas on purity and pollution. In my upbringing within the clan, on the German side blood sausage and on the Swedish side lutfisk⁴ provoked amused discussions especially in front of the children. As an adult, some seafood I've been offered (e.g., sea cucumber), and some organ meats (brains) seemed beyond my own comfort zone, though I have tried eel, whale, snails, horsemeat, guinea pigs, and rabbit. But beyond the novelty of new cuisine, and educating one's palate, lies a web of ethics and ideology. Taste isn't simply in the mouth, it's in the mind.

TWO: Terms and Conditions

First of all, we need to set the terms. While “disgust” is usable and familiar, a more complex elaboration has followed the psychoanalytically influenced term “abjection,” particularly in the wake of Julia Kristeva's elaboration of the term in her analysis of horror. But, noting that “disgust” is bound to the contingency of specific cultural settings (for example the term itself is not universally translated even in Indo-European languages), it may be useful to elaborate the concept outward to include “distress” or other terms that express a disturbance that the text or media element at hand creates in a reader/spectator/audience.

But, to start and place a flag, disgust is a fact, something observable. Some parts of some media texts evoke or provoke a distaste, disturbance, or other kind of rejection by the audience. Artists know this and can employ it to artistic effect. But it is also readily seen that this response varies by individuals. Not everyone is repulsed in the same way or to the same extent by the same stimulus. So, we surmise that individual psychology and perhaps experience have something to do with it.

³ Richard Spencer, “China hunting for online kitten killer,” *National Post* (Canada) March 4, 2006, p. A15.

⁴A dish that consists of cod processed with lye subsequently reconstituted.

In terms of film, which is my main reference point here, we've all had the experience of ourselves being with others who found certain films or parts of them revolting, annoying, or obnoxious. Common conversations about the recent cinema often includes mentions of this. A doesn't like explicit violence, while B doesn't seem to be bothered by it. C objects to a specific example in a specific film, but doesn't share an aversion to a very similar sequence in another film. Are these just idiosyncratic variations? Part of the normal range of differences in art receptions? Or is there something deeper going on? I think it needs more investigation, and I'd move from the microlevel of individual reaction to a much broader cultural scope and try to think about another observable phenomenon: horrible or disgusting images and narrative materials vary significantly by culture and tradition. Clearly, while "disgust" as an emotion may be universal in humankind, what provokes disgust varies from culture to culture, and within cultures by class, certainly, and it seems by gender and other social variables.